



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 14

Issue 2 June - Special Issue on Social Welfare History

Article 5

May 1987

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, Eve P. (1987) "The Failure of the Destitute Mother's Bill: The Use of Political Power in Social Welfare," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol14/iss2/5>

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THE FAILURE OF THE  
DESTITUTE MOTHER'S BILL:  
THE USE OF POLITICAL POWER  
IN SOCIAL WELFARE

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*Although social and economic conditions and prevailing popular philosophies may affect the success or failure of an attempt at change in social welfare policy and practice, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the political forces for and against the change may be more important. In 1897, fourteen years before the passage of the first U.S. Mothers' Pension law in Illinois, New York State Senator John Ahearn attempted such a law in New York. Although the bill was passed unanimously by both houses of the State Legislature, it was never signed into law. The reason was that the children's institutions and other philanthropic organizations formed a coalition and effectively organized against the proposed bill, while supporters of the bill were not organized. Although it failed, this attempt contributed to the future passage of Mothers' Pensions law by helping to bring the issue to public attention, and stimulating the creation of other programs that would address the problem.*

At approximately thirty year intervals, attempts are made to significantly change the policies and practices of the social welfare institutions in the United States. In 1935, for example, the Social Security Act became federal law. In the 1960's, attempts were made, at various levels of government,

to liberalize the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. Currently, major changes, such as the addition of work requirements for mothers of young children, are also being considered. While reforms of the 1960's were often met with strenuous resistance, current proposals appear to be gathering general support.

Why are some proposed changes implemented, while others are not? The answer lies, in part, in social and economic conditions, and prevailing philosophies of the times. Still more influential, however, may be the relative strengths and weaknesses of the political forces for and against the changes, with whom those forces are allied, and how well they are organized.

Such failures to initiate reforms, however, may also be precursors of successful attempts. Outcomes may be (1) that the issues are brought to public attention for later action; (2) that more effective efforts may then be organized; and (3) that alternate programs addressing the problems may be developed.

This paper examines one historical instance of successful resistance to reform; the failure of an attempt to change public policy regarding dependent children and their families in New York City at the turn of the century. It also examines the contribution of that effort to eventual success.

## THE STORY OF THE DESTITUTE MOTHERS' BILL

On March 30, 1897,<sup>1</sup> State Senator John Francis Ahearn of New York City introduced a reform bill in the New York State Legislature. His bill would have provided funds for some destitute New York City parents and would have enabled them to care for their own children instead of being forced to place them in institutions. The act, which was called the "Destitute Mothers' Bill", read as follows:

"When any child shall hereafter be committed to the care of any institution in the city of New York, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in said city, shall, upon the

application of the parent or guardian of such child, in a proper case, after a careful and thorough inquiry, direct that the custody of such child be given to its parent or guardian, and in such event the comptroller of said city of New York is authorized to pay said society, for transmission by it to such a parent or guardian, the money allowed by law for the maintenance, care and welfare of such child and paid by said city to the institution to which it may have been committed.

"The said society may revoke any such change of custody and return such child to the institution to which it was originally committed, whenever in its judgment the interests of said child will be benefited thereby . . ."

The New York City charitable organizations were in complete and unanimous disagreement with this reform proposal. But initially, they took no action, since they had been assured that the bill would be killed. Nine days after it was introduced, however, the "Destitute Mothers' Bill" unanimously passed the Senate, and the day after, the Assembly. Neither body had held hearings. Since this proposed law would apply exclusively to New York City,<sup>2</sup> however, the Mayor was required to hold a public hearing. This was scheduled for April 21st. In preparation, the State Charities Aid Association circulated an alert to all New York City Charitable organizations. The alert was successful. At the hearing, which lasted less than one hour, there were only two speakers for the bill, and more than twelve against. Among the twelve against were representatives of both private and governmental agencies: William R. Stewart, President of the State Board of Charities; John P. Fauvre, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Public Charities; John B. Pine, representative of the State Charities Aid Association; representatives of agencies that maintained children's institutions and agencies that worked with poor families; and Elbridge T. Gerry, President of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the agency that would be charged with dispensing payments and supervising the destitute families should the Ahearn bill become law.

The agencies' arguments attacked all key provisions of the proposed bill. If it were passed, they said, a system of public outdoor relief would be reestablished in the City, and this, they claimed, would "promote pauperism, discourage self-reliance and thrift, and . . . (would be) liable to flagrant abuses" (Twenty-fifth Annual Report . . . , 1897, pp. 81-82). In addition, it was argued that the sum was set without relation to the need of the parties to be aided; administration of the law was to be placed in the hands of a private corporation with no responsibility to the taxpayers; parents receiving two dollars per week per child would not have enough money because they would not be supplemented with additional private funds as were the institutions; and above all, it was objected that the bill would encourage "shiftless fathers" to desert their families since the later could then be supported by public monies. Based on this assumption, it was argued that the number of children to be supported as public charges would grow. The City was then spending almost \$2,000,000 per year for the care of dependent children: if the bill were passed, many additional families would surely apply for public money because they would no longer have to suffer the pain of separation in order to feed their children.

The only speakers in favor of the bill were Bernard Downing, who represented Senator Ahearn, and Mrs. Silas P. Severidge, who said that she devoted a great deal of her time to visiting the poor, but was not connected with any particular organization. Mr. Downing focused his testimony on the harm to children that results from institutionalization. As reported by Homer Folks in the July-August issue of the *Charities Review*, Downing said that he ". . . wished that a Dickens might be present to portray these benevolent managers, who insisted that the only proper way to assist a poor mother was to take her children away from her and support them in their institutions" (Folks 1897, p. 497). Folks reported that Mrs. Severidge "assured the Mayor that, if he could appreciate the distress and suffering of parents who had been compelled to give up their children, he would not

withhold his signature from the bill''<sup>3</sup> (Folks, 1897, p. 497).

The Mayor had fifteen days from the time he received the bill to return it to the Legislature with his comments. His disapproval reached them on the last possible day. Unfortunately for the proponents of the bill, this was the last day of the legislative session, and it was too late for the legislature to re-vote it over the Mayor's disapproval. It was never signed by the Governor.

In 1898, on the first day of the next legislative session, the Destitute Mothers' Bill was again introduced by Senator Ahearn. This time the charity organizations were ready: they called for and got hearings before the Senate Committee on the Affairs of Cities.<sup>4</sup> The bill was bottled up in this committee and never reached the floor for a vote, nor did it the following year, even when it was introduced in modified form to meet the objections of the charity organizations.

The Sixteenth Annual Report of the Charity Organization Society of New York describes that hearing.<sup>5</sup> It was argued that:

"... this plan is a scarcely disguised form of outdoor relief, that there are serious objections to any plan by which the State undertakes to pay parents for the care of their own children, and that 'shiftless fathers' would be quite as apt as 'destitute mothers' to claim the indulgence of the Society and the public. All these and other weighty, if less obvious arguments were urged in a variety of telling addresses before the Senate Committee by a strong representative delegation from the charitable societies and institutions of New York City, and the committee, accepting the views thus presented, allowed the bill to remain unreported (Sixteenth Annual Report . . ., 1898, pp. 10-11).

The bill failed despite the fact that there had begun to be public distrust of children's institutions. Abraham Epstein, describing public opinion in the 1890's observed that there was a

"... realization that huge asylums were bad for children, mothers and society . . . Institutional life dulled and blighted the inmates. Institutional children were frequently slower to

develop, and altogether too many were unable to cope with life outside of the institution. Even a second-rate mother was recognized as better than the very best institution, while a good mother could do for her own children what no other woman or organization could do . . . Some low-grade institutions also showed exceedingly high death rates which shocked the nation" (Epstein, 1933, p. 623).

From 1894 through 1898, the *New York Times* carried numerous stories about institutions' mistreatment and illegal transport of children West, and also related instances in which institutions refused to cooperate with the Commissioner of Accounts when he tried to investigate alleged City overpayments for the care of children who were public charges. On June 5th of 1895, for example, an article appeared under the headline, "Deborah Nursery: Superintendent B. Abrams charged with cruelty"<sup>6</sup> from March, 1894 through October, 1897, nineteen stories appeared about allegations of cruelty and corporal punishment of inmates by the Superintendent of the Westchester Temporary Home for Destitute Children, J.W. Pierce.<sup>7</sup> In June 1897, stories appeared relating that "New York Foundling Asylum Agent R. Curran sells children in Chicago"<sup>8</sup>; on April 1, 1897, there was a report that "John Neese (was) sent West by Gerry Society Without Guardian's Permission"<sup>9</sup>. In November, 1894, a story appeared relating that "Charitable institutions (are) paid for more County Wards than Legal . . ."<sup>10</sup>; in August, 1896, there was a report of investigations by the Commissioner of Accounts over overpayments by the City Controller to the Infant Asylum<sup>11</sup>; and in May, 1898, there were several articles about another investigation by the Commissioner of Accounts: this time, of the Immaculate Virgin Mission on Staten Island<sup>12</sup>

Not only the *New York Times*, but other periodicals published articles opposing the use of institutions for the care of dependent children. An example of such an article appeared in the *North American Review* of April, 1897. It depicted the "evil results of institutional life and training." Its author, Henry Smith Williams, cited the fact that New York City was then caring for 16,000 children in twenty-five institu-

tions, one in thirty-five, at a cost of about four million dollars annually. He believed such care was inappropriate and expensive:

" . . . About 70,000 children in the U.S. are being reared in this abnormal way, and the taxpayers and benevolent individuals are together paying over \$10,000,000 a year . . . How much it cost them later on to complete the task in the police courts, almshouses, work houses and prisons, it would be impossible to correctly estimate" (Williams, 1897, pp. 404-414).

Nor was the press alone. Judges, who in some places had the responsibility for committing children to be cared for at State expense, often became spokesmen against institutional child-rearing. Senator Ahearn, who had spent five years as a clerk of one of the New York City police courts, witnessed countless cases of children removed from their families and sent to institutions solely because their parents were unable to provide for them financially.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE "NEW YORK SYSTEM" FOR THE CARE OF DESTITUTE CHILDREN

To understand why the care of dependent children had become a serious public concern in New York City, it is necessary to consider how children's institutions evolved there.

While social welfare services were developing largely as government-run entities in most parts of the United States, New York City had instead developed a system of publicly funded private agencies, largely controlled by their philanthropic boards.

As early as 1811, the New York State Legislature provided funds for the institutional care of dependent children by private agencies. By the middle of the century, large-scale immigration, uncontrolled industrialization and sharp business swings were responsible for the development of a growing class of urban poor. The number of children whose parents were unable to care for them multiplied. Immigration brought social disorganization: parents who had difficulty coping in a new land with a new language, culture and



societal values had the added difficulty of coping with unemployment, low pay, and the demands of working long hours in order to eat. Some were unable to provide needed food, clothing and shelter. Many were unable to exercise the necessary parental guidance and control that would insure that the children would grow up with the ability to function appropriately. Some children became vagrants.

Brace's solution was the "placing out" of children with families in the country. From 1853 through 1890, the Children's Aid Society moved more than 85,000 children from New York City to farm families in upstate New York, New Jersey, and as far away as Minnesota, Kansas and Texas.<sup>13</sup> Not all of these children were abandoned vagrants or orphans, however. Many were brought to the Society by parents who were too poor to provide food and other necessities. Giving them up was the only way to keep the children alive. He placed children without regard to religion. While many of the new immigrants were Roman Catholics, and later, Jews, most of the farmers who received the children were Protestants.

In reaction, Catholics and Jews created large congregational institutions for the care of their co-religionists' children. However, although these were established under voluntary and sectarian auspices, they were in large part funded by the City and State of New York. The Hebrew Benevolent Society and Orphan Asylum in the City of New York, for example, received a parcel of land on 77th Street and Third Avenue, donated by the City for the purpose of erecting a building to house 200 orphans. The City also contributed \$30,000 toward building costs, and the State Assembly agreed to contribute another \$35,000. The Society had only to raise \$20,000. By 1874, the Society was receiving about 70 percent of its operating budget, or \$23,203.97, from public funds (Bernard, 1973, p. 10 and 14).

The very next year, the legislature adopted an act that would stimulate even greater growth in the use of institutions to house children. The Children's Law of 1875<sup>14</sup> required that children between the ages of three and sixteen

be removed from poorhouses ("unless such child be an unteachable idiot, an epileptic or paralytic, or be defective, diseased or deformed . . .") and were to be placed in a children's institution or home governed by persons of the same religion as their parents (Schneider and Deutch, 1938-1941 p. 63).

The result was a rapid growth in specialized children's institutions. In 1875, the year of enactment, there were only 9,363 institutionalized New York City children who were public charges. By 1888, the number had increased by 68 percent, to 15,697. During this period, the amount of public monies spent for the care of those children rose by 115 percent (N.Y. State Board of Charities, 1980, p. 181). By 1898, the number of children in care away from their families had risen to 18,000. The time that each child remained in care also lengthened during this period. In 1875, only 8 percent of all institutionalized children stayed more than five years: by 1894, 23 percent were long-term residents (Bernard, 1973, p. 34).

Public response to this change led to attempts at systemic change that would limit the number of children in care. The Revised Constitution of 1894 gave more power to the state supervising body, the State Board of Charities. This body then issued tightened eligibility requirements and required public agency approval before children could be placed in private institutions as public charges. The New York City Department of Public Charities employed a staff of examiners to investigate the circumstances of families before the children were placed, and at yearly intervals thereafter.

The new measures were effective as long as they were enforced. While there had been an increase of 15.8 percent in the number of institutionalized children from 1890 to 1894, there was a decrease from 1894 to 1896 of 8.6 percent (State Charities Aid Association of New York, 1898, p. 6). The fact that New York was in the throes of an acute economic depression through 1895 makes this decrease even more significant. The number rose again in 1897, however. The Annual Report of the State Charities Aid Association of

November 1, 1898, stated that "... the New Constitution (was) remarkably successful and effective for about three years, appears to have lost something of its restraining force" (State Charities Aid Association of New York, 1898, p. 10). As the cost to the public again grew, so did public concern.

#### THE OPPOSITION OF THE "PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY" TO MOTHERS' PENSIONS

Even though there was a developing consensus against institutions, the defenders of the institutions profited from the fact that, in 1897, social welfare leaders still regarded a destitute mothers' subsidy as an alternative even worse than institutionalization. To them, the primary objection was that Senator Ahearn's proposed reform would route public money to poor parents.

The bill was opposed not only by representatives of childcaring institutions who stood to lose public funding if the law passed: it was also opposed by officials of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and by other social work organizations<sup>15</sup> who, even though they were against institutionalization of children, could not support a reform that would make benefit payments to poor parents.

Notable social workers who spoke out against mothers' pensions were Mary Richmond, Edward T. Devine, and Josephine Lowell, founder of the New York Charity Organization Society and member of the New York State Board of Charities from 1876 to 1889. Lowell was against mothers' pensions even though she believed that institutions were bad for children, and had previously stated that "... it ought to be considered cruel and wicked to take children away from a decent mother just for want of money to support them and friends to look after them. . . ." Her fear of the encouragement of "pauperism", however, appeared to have been stronger than her belief that poor children should not be removed from their mothers.

The agency that took the lead in organizing the opposi-

tion to what some social workers called Ahearn's "Shiftless Fathers' Bill" was the State Charities Aid Association, an organization whose general secretary, Homer Folks, was actually an active proponent of keeping children out of institutions.

Why, then, was there such adamant opposition to subsidizing poor parents so as to prevent institutionalization? According to I.M. Rubinow, who wrote in 1934, one explanation of the resistance of social work to "mothers' pensions" is that it resulted from the identification of social work of the late 19th century with private philanthropy (Rubinow, 1934, p. 487). The Boards of both children's institutions and charity organizations were largely composed of philanthropists who were closely related to the industrial elite.

Most philanthropists were adamantly opposed to any form of outdoor relief. During one forum on mothers' pensions, for example, philanthropist, Otto T. Bannard, argued that "... widows' pensions would eventually lead to such horrors as old-age pensions, free food for the unemployed, will breed candidates for alms, will repress self-help and self-respect, is not American, and is the entering wedge of state socialism (Rubinow, 1934, pp. 487-488).

Statements such as this were not simply a matter of rich versus poor, however. To fully understand why mothers' pensions in general, and Senator Ahearn's proposal in particular were so heartily condemned, it is necessary to understand the role social welfare organizations played in relation to the political and philosophical debates of the era. One must also understand the degree to which local social work was shaped by the corrupt politics of New York City in the late 19th century.

#### THE "ESTABLISHMENT'S" VIEW OF THE POOR

Social workers, philanthropists and New York State officials of the latter half of the Nineteenth Century tended to believe that the poor were responsible for their poverty. According to the New York State Senate's *Report of the Select*

*Committee Appointed to Visit Charitable Institutions Supported by the State* in 1857, “. . . the kind of poverty which ends in a poor house . . . is not unusually the result of such self-indulgence, unthrift, excess, or idleness, as is next of kind to criminality” (New York State Senate, 1857, pp. 9-10).

“Pauperism”, as opposed to poverty, was of particular concern to many nineteenth century Americans: its discussion constituted a major topic of the first meeting of the National Conference of Boards of Public Charities, in May 1874. According to Frank J. Bruno, primary concern was for “the weakness of the victims of destitution . . . for treatment, and even for cure, and not much attention was paid to those situations, external to the dependent, which might throw some light upon the reasons for their dependence” (Bruno, 1957, p. 27).

According to the common wisdom of the rich of the era, the poor, who chose their lot, were unwilling to work hard, preferring a life of vice, ignorance and crime. They had comparatively little self-control: Brace wrote that “. . . the high lessons of duty and consideration for others are seldom stamped on them, and Religion does not much influence their more delicate relations with those associated with them” (Brace, 1872, p. 40). F.A. Walker, in the December 1897 issue of *Century Magazine*, wrote:

“Pauperism is, in truth, largely voluntary to the full degree in which anything can be said to be voluntary in a world of causation, a matter, if not of definite and conscious choice, then of appetites and aptitudes indulged or submitted to from inherent baseness or cowardice or moral weakness. Those who are paupers are so far more from character than from condition. They have the pauper taint; they bear the pauper brand (Walker, 1897, p. 210; Howard, 1897).

Even Amos Warner, a social welfare leader who pioneered in the consideration of social causes of poverty, in his first edition of *American Charities*, published in 1894, “treated poverty no matter what the cause, as synonymous with ‘degeneration’ ” (Bremner, 1956, p. 71).

One prevailing philosophy of the day was “Social Dar-

winism." Darwin's study of evolution was interpreted by Herbert Spencer, an English civil engineer turned sociologist, to mean that those who were unable to maintain themselves in society should not be aided by those more able, but should be allowed to die lest they reproduce more of their own kind and thus weaken society. According to Spencer, "The unfit must be eliminated as nature intended, for the principle of natural selection must not be violated by the artificial preservation of those least able to take care of themselves (Bremner, 1956, p. 71).

The principles of Social Darwinism were not fully accepted in the United States, but were modified by a strong tradition which still saw a value in charitable impulses stimulated by the presence of poor people. According to Tratner, "even Herbert Spencer, when accused of hardness of heart because of his attitude toward the poor . . . retreated to the position that voluntary charity could be tolerated in that it encouraged the development of altruism, a Christian Virtue" (Bremner, 1956, p. 82).

Those who were concerned with the care of dependent children in the United States were often influenced by a Social Darwinist philosophy. They believed, however, that even though poor adults were not redeemable, their children could be taught and would be positively affected by positive environments. Brace believed that since so many of the poor died before adulthood, the survivors might be genetically superior to their parents. He therefore argued that if poor children were removed from the poor environment of their parental homes and placed in positive environments on farms and in country villages, their inherent virtues would triumph and they would become productive and well-behaved citizens (Brace, 1872, pp. 45-46). In accordance with such philosophies, it was considered more appropriate for dependent children of the later half of the nineteenth century to be cared for apart from their poor parents, who therefore, would not need financial support.

The giving of alms or other "outdoor relief" was supposed to have encouraged "pauperism" and economic de-

pendency, "a pernicious social disease." Therefore, the givers of philanthropy in the 1890's "operated on the theory that people ought to be self-supporting and that those who were not must be led or driven into taking care of themselves" (Bremner, 1956, p. 124).

Many believed that the English were correct in their administration of poor relief, where new Poor Law provisions, passed as early as 1834, eliminated outdoor relief, entirely. Mr. Peabody, in his article, "How Should a City Care for its Poor", published in December, 1892, said that, "We, like the English, distrust out-door relief; we apply the "poor-house test". If a person is not willing to go to a city institution, we argue, he is probably not poor enough to need city help . . . we defend the community from the pauper" (Peabody, 1892, pp. 474-491). Only those who were thoroughly investigated by a private agency and were deemed "worthy" should be given limited help; preferably in the form of work.

Although industrial expansion brought growing wealth for the nation, it also brought periodic depressions where countless laborers were thrown out of work. At best, workers had to accept inadequate wages, according to what the market would bear, and poor housing conditions. Until the end of the century, these conditions tended to be largely ignored, however. While poverty was regarded as an indicator of criminality and inferiority, money, and those who acquired it, by whatever means, became the nation's heroes. Those who were unable to maintain themselves were considered genetically and morally unfit (Trattner, 1974, p. 81).

Even as the philanthropists and their social work agency representatives embraced an "anti-poor" philosophy, there are indicators of a more sympathetic public attitude (Gladden, 1892; and Abbott, 1894). The closing of the frontier, and the obvious dearth of jobs during economic depressions made the poor seem less like criminals and more like victims (Bremner, 1956, p. 30). In many areas of the country, especially during and after the Civil War, the practice of providing public outdoor relief to those in need, continued.

In New York and in some other large cities, however,

where there were many more philanthropists and social workers, the tendency was to provide "outdoor relief" through private agencies only, and "indoor" or almshouse relief through government. Not only did this policy follow logically from the ideology of the "establishment", it could also be defended as a way of preventing public graft and bribery.

#### PHILANTHROPISTS' OPPOSITION TO TAMMANY

Corruption in government was rampant in big cities. During the reign of "Boss Tweed" in New York, the public treasury was systematically raided. An investigation of the Department of Public Charities in 1874 showed serious discrepancies, and led to a sharp reduction in the Department's budget (Schneider . . . , p. 35). Social workers and others complained that public relief went to aid not those who were worthy and in need, but was primarily used to buy votes, and to reward the politicians' friends.

In reality, the "Tammany Hall" politicians and their public welfare system were in competition with private relief agencies. Many poor persons found application to private agencies demeaning and embarrassing, and preferred instead to seek financial assistance from politicians who asked in return their votes rather than their self-respect.

The anti-corruption forces, which included the social welfare community and many of their rich and powerful board members, worked to put their own "reform" candidates into office. When these "good government" forces gained power, Tammany's "alternative" welfare system was destroyed with the cessation of public outdoor relief in New York City. In the midst of a prolonged economic depression that lasted from 1873 to 1878, the Board of Estimate voted (during February 1875) to limit public relief to cash grants to the adult blind, and to the distribution of a half-ton of coal each to needy families during the winter. In December 1876, in the midst of the coal distribution, they voted to discontinue all public outdoor relief except to blind persons.

Private charity was supposed to take up the slack. How-



ever, in reality, as the number of unemployed persons increased, that became an impossibility. During the suspension of public relief in the last half of 1874, for example, the caseload of the Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor increased by 355 percent. In 1873 the organization aided 5,292 persons; in 1874, 24,091. Naturally, each family got less, since the dollars expended less than doubled.

It became evident that private funds were insufficient; public funds were needed. In 1876 and 1877 the Board of Estimate voted money to private agencies for direct aid: on January 20, 1876, the sum of \$35,200 was granted to six private agencies to be expended "during the present winter for food, clothing and shelter for the poor (Schneider, 1938-1941, p. 35). Public money was again being used. This time, however, there was less of it, and control was in the hands of the rich philanthropists and their agents rather than politicians whom they did not control.

By the time of the depression of 1893 to 1895, both city and private organizations had developed work relief programs. While these were inadequate to the number of persons unemployed, they were consistent with the belief that the giving of alms encouraged pauperism. The Twentieth Annual Report of the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York contains a clear statement of that philosophy. It read:

"The ideas upon which organized charity rest are that pauperism—the degrading dependence of one person or family upon others for the necessities of life—should not be encouraged or acquiesced in, but, on the contrary, that it should be energetically and hopefully combated; that the transformation of those who are by nature or by misfortune dependents upon charity into self-supporting and self-respecting members of the community requires patience, skill and devotion; that a judicious combination of volunteer and professional service is most likely to produce the desired result; and that when temporary or even permanent financial assistance is necessary, as it often is, such assistance should not be given mechanically or carelessly—in other words, as alms, or doles—but on full and accurate knowledge, on a definite plan, and with personal interest in the individual who is

helped, as a human being" (The Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, 1902, p. 13).

#### PRIVATE CHARITY'S ALTERNATIVES TO MOTHERS' PENSIONS

Senator Ahearn's attempt was part of a growing dissatisfaction with one way of caring for dependent children, and a move toward another. Although its failure meant that many children who could live with their families would continue to be cared for in institutions for some years, it also stimulated further action and development of alternative programs. The organizations that fought the bill, even though they were against institutionalization of children, were stimulated to look for alternative methods of addressing the problem. In an effort to eliminate the need for mothers' pensions, then, the private charitable organizations developed a number of programs designed to keep children with their families. Day nurseries for the children of working mothers, and programs of private relief were established and grew; job-placing programs were developed. The State Charities' Aid Association was constantly looking for alternatives that would prevent the separation of mothers and their children (Schneider . . . , pp. 181-183). They organized a program to place single mothers in positions in the country where their children would be accepted.

Indeed, as a direct outgrowth of the Ahearn bill, the Charity Organization Society created their "Committee on Dependent Children", which was to examine all applications made by parents for the institutional care of their children, and, as an alternative to placement, to help all "worthy" families remain together. Since all applications for institutionalization were processed through the Department of Public Charities, each day a representative of the Committee went to their offices to examine the records. Home investigations were made of the most likely candidates for their services, and those families deemed "worthy" were aided. In its Seventeenth Annual Report, the Committee proudly stated that no special funding was needed for this program, because the Society "called upon friends, relatives, employers,

neighbors or . . . when necessary, turned to strangers—either individual donors or relief societies” such as the St. Vincent de Paul or the United Hebrew Charities (The Charity Organization Society of New York, 1899, p. 14).

Few families were found worthy, however. During the first year, the Society examined the records of 888 families representing the possible placement of 1,607 children. Their standards must have been exceedingly stringent, however. According to their report, most of the families were not considered worthy of Charity Organization Society assistance: 599 families were rejected, and 1,111 children, or 69% of the total, were institutionalized.

### THE ULTIMATE PASSAGE OF MOTHERS' PENSIONS LAWS

Twelve years after the first introduction of the “Destitute Mothers' Bill”, in 1909, the first White House Conference on Children issued a pronouncement that “Home life is the highest and finest product of civilization . . . children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons . . .”<sup>16</sup> This pronouncement gave voice to what had become, by 1909, a widespread sentiment in favor of legislation to provide “widows' pensions”, or financial assistance for mothers of children whose father were dead or otherwise absent and unable to assume financial responsibility for them. Such legislation was at last initiated in 1911 in Illinois and reached New York in 1915. These laws were the precursors to the federal AFDC provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935.

A number of factors led to the eventual passage of these reforms. According to Schneider, mothers' pensions finally became a reality when social outrage demanded them. During the years from 1895 to 1915, the public's growing interest in child welfare, in conjunction with other reforms of the Progressive Era, led to an extension of responsibility for the welfare of the dependent, delinquent and handicapped children (Schneider . . . , p. 197). In addition, institutionalization was costly. Epstein, who commented in 1933, stated that “. . . public authorities outraged motherhood [not only] by breaking up homes and paying for the support of dependent children in institutions . . . [but also because] the cost in

dollars and cents proved higher than if the mother had been paid for raising her children" (Epstein, 1933, p. 624).

Support for mother's pensions had indeed grown. According to Mark Leff, a number of progressive newspapers and magazines contributed to public demand for change. The *Delineator*, a women's fashion magazine, began an active anti-institution campaign in 1907 which eventually grew into a crusade for mother's pensions. Other newspapers and magazines that contributed editorials and endorsements were the *New York Evening World*, the *Scripps-McRae* and *Hearst* chains, and *Outlook*, *Nation*, and *Public*.

Soon after the establishment of juvenile courts, many judges became aware that mothers' pensions were needed. It became evident from the experience in such courts that (1) many delinquents were the children of mothers who were not around to train, influence and care for their children because they had to work, and (2) that many mothers and children were separated solely because of poverty (Cohen, 1924, pp. 115-116).

By 1909, many advocates believed that children had a right to be brought up in a family. At the White House Conference on Children in 1909, the Honorable Julian Mack, Judge of the Cook County Circuit Court said:

"I cannot understand why poverty alone should give anybody the right to deprive the child of that which it needs most in life—its own parents' love and care and sympathy . . . to deprive the parent of that which he or she needs most in life, the love and support of the child, the reciprocal relations between the parent and the child."<sup>17</sup>

Some (but certainly not all) Charity Organization Society and Children's social workers who had been against mothers' pensions now supported them. What seemed like a daring and unwise idea to the social workers and philanthropists of 1897 became public policy in most states by 1915, federal law by 1935, and has remained in force ever since. Despite the fact that the number and type of mothers covered was always limited, despite intermittent controversy about the effects of public assistance on recipients, and de-

spite recent attempts to restrict that assistance; the complete elimination of the AFDC program has never since been seriously proposed.

## CONCLUSION

It should be noted that there are two principle explanations for the resistance to mothers' pensions. First, the charitable organizations of the 1890's were committed to their social philosophy. They believed they were right about the nature of poverty, and of poor persons. A system of public mothers' pensions would be in direct contradiction to what they believed was just, proper and effective. They therefore acted on their beliefs in an effective, efficient and well-organized way. They acknowledged the problem, and offered what they saw as a solution, condemning Senator Ahearn's solution because (1) they believed it would cause more problems than it would solve, and (2) it would cause them to lose some of their power to exercise control over the behavior of poor persons.

The second explanation has to do with the nature of the organizations involved and of their interests. The nature of a bureaucracy is that it works not only to carry out its societal function, but also to insure its own survival. According to Merton's theory of "vested interests", it is to the advantage of those in power to oppose any change that will "either eliminate or at least make uncertain their differential advantage deriving from current arrangements" (Merton, 1968, p. 253).

It was their vested interests that accounted for the great resistance put forth by the agencies. On the one hand, the children's institutions stood to lose children and therefore a portion of their funding. Earlier action by City and State had already resulted in a reduction in the number of children in care, and such children were needed if the institutions were to survive. The organizations that dispensed private charity, on the other hand, stood to lose their central function in the social welfare field if public outdoor relief became the method for aiding the poor. And, the implementation of a

program so contrary to their practices would have implied extreme criticism.

The agencies that formed a coalition against the Ahearn bill were organized in such a way that they could rapidly mobilize support, and each agency had the ability to appear at hearings and to testify. The State Charities Aid Association had full-time staff that could write letters, contact other agencies, influence people, and plan strategies. Legislators and public officials were used to hearing from and dealing with officials of the charitable organizations, whose connections with powerful philanthropists were well-known. Mayor Strong, a one-term "anti-corruption" Mayor in a city long ruled by corrupt Tammany politicians, had been helped into office by the very persons who also held membership on agency boards.

On the other hand, in 1897, there was no organization for mothers' pensions. At Mayor Strong's hearings in 1897 only two persons showed up to testify for the bill, a representative of Senator Ahearn, who didn't think that it was necessary to attend, himself; and a woman who said she represented nobody, and therefore had no power, and no voters to influence. The testimony of the bill's proponents focused only on why the current system was harmful. Rather than answer them, the proponents simply ignored the charitable organizations' predictions of dire consequences if the bill were passed. The testimony of the various representatives of the charitable organizations, on the other hand, while acknowledging that the break-up of families was to be avoided where possible, claimed that the solution was wrong, would be harmful to the persons involved and would be extremely costly to the public.

By virtue of their apparent expertise, their connections with the powerful, their relationships with legislators and public officials, and their logical follow-through, the arguments of the charitable organizations' officials carried more weight. It was not until later, when another faction of social workers joined in alliance with politicians and others to mount in an effort for mothers' pensions, that such legislation was successful.

## NOTES

1. The date of March 30, 1897 was reported in the Twenty-Fifth Annual Report of the State Charities Aid Association (Page 80). According to Homer Folks' article, "Proposed Legislation Concerning Children in New York," appearing in *The Charities Review* (July-August 1897), the legislation was introduced on March 13. The date of introduction of the Ahearn Bill is not available in the records of the New York State Legislature for 1897 because it was not signed into law.
2. Senator Ahearn's bill provided mothers' pensions only for the poor of New York City and not the State as a whole because such aid was available in the rest of the state through a system of outdoor public relief. Outdoor relief had been curtailed only in New York City.
3. "Scored the Ahearn Bill", *New York Times*, (July 22, 1897) p. 12.
4. "Parents' Compensation for Indigent Children; Senate Committee Hearing on Ahearn Bill", *New York Times*, February 9, 1898, Page 3.
5. According to librarians at the New York State Library, legislative records of the original hearings would not have been preserved since the bill never became law.
6. *New York Times*, June 5, 1895, page 8, column 3; June 6, 1895, page 2, column 4.
7. *New York Times*, March 4, 1894, page 13; January 1, 1896, page 9; January 5, page 17; January 10, page 10; January 14, page 9; January 25, page 9; January 28, page 10; February 4, page 16; February 11, page 10; February 23, page 17; February 25, page 16; February 28, page 9; March 19, page 9; March 20, page 9; March 26, page 2; March 27, page 8; September 3, page 16; June 19, 1897, page 2; October 7, page 4.
8. *New York Times*, June 19, 1897, page 1; June 20, page 12.
9. *New York Times*, April 1, 1897, page 1.
10. *New York Times*, November 29, 1894, page 1.
11. *New York Times*, August 6, 1896, page 3.
12. *New York Times*, May 18, 1898, page 12; May 19, page 14.
13. Estimates of the actual number of children placed vary. While Thurston estimated that the number of children placed from 1853 through 1929 was 31,081, Langsam (*Children West*, 1964) reported

- 85,292 children placed. Her figures were taken directly from the annual reports of the Society.
14. *Laws of 1875*, Chapter 173.
  15. Opposing organizations included the Charity Organization Society; the State Charities' Aid Association; the Society of St. Vincent de Paul; and the New York State Board of Charities.
  16. "Letter to the President of the United States Embodying the Conclusions of the Conference on the Care of Dependent Children," *Proceedings of the Conference on the Care of Dependent Children*, 1909, pp. 192-197; as found in Bremner, *Children*, 2:365-366.
  17. *Proceedings of the Conference on the Care of Dependent Children*, 1909, pp. 41-53, reprinted in Bremner, *Children*, 2:363.

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